

NETWORKED COLLABORATIVE SYSTEM

Background of the Invention

The present invention relates to a system for communicating among a moderator, participants, and others in a collaborative exchange over a network.

There are a number of settings in which it is desirable for participants in a collaborative setting to be able to communicate and exchange ideas, comments, and/or suggestions electronically. For example, while a traditional classroom setting facilitates discussion which can be organized and directed by a teacher, the possibilities are more limited if the students are in different physical locations and participate electronically. In a business context, members of a development team or other group may not be able meet in one physical location or at one time, but may desire to engage in a structured collaborative project.

While it is currently possible for people to communicate by email, it would be desirable to have a system that includes multiple messaging applications grouped together, and a system that allows significant flexibility for a moderator of a discussion to control the flow of messages among participants. In addition, it would be desirable to have different types of messaging that could be used among participants or between participants and a moderator.

Summary of the Invention

The present invention includes a system, a platform, and methods for accomplishing a number of tasks related to networked communications among groups of participants, particularly in connection with a collaborative development or other business project, or in an educational setting. The present invention includes a structured system for allowing participants, moderators, and adjunct personnel to interact over a network, preferably the Internet. In an educational context, the system can be part of one or more courses that could be taught over a network; with a course that is taught in person, the present system could be used to supplement such a course.

EXPRESS MAIL LABEL NO. EL1718364740J
DATE OF DEPOSIT 7/6/00

1 The communication system of the present invention preferably includes
2 one or more modules and features, including a question module that allows
3 questions to be presented by a moderator (e.g., in an educational setting, a
4 teacher) with opening and closing times; an ability to create discussion pairs or
5 groups, preferably from using information provided by or about the participants;
6 an ability to route questions and comments to others, such as people with
7 additional expertise; and the ability to archive comments. In an educational
8 setting, the participants may be students. In a business setting, the participants
9 may be the members of a development team or other project. The people with
10 additional expertise may be consultants or other employees who are not part of a
11 project, or other faculty members.

12 The system thus provides a flexible mechanism for a moderator to create a
13 network of dialogue among participants and optionally with other adjunct
14 personnel. The system also allows interaction with other modules, such as a
15 registration module. While the system is described here for illustrative purposes
16 in the context of a "teacher" with "students," the system can be used at many
17 levels of education or can be used for other forum or group discussions that may
18 not be "courses," such as in a business context with a moderator and participants
19 from various business units or with different specialties or experiences in a
20 dialogue about ideas for a product or service. The system can be used as a
21 module or subsystem in a larger, scalable, internet education technology with
22 other features, systems, and modules. Other features and advantages will
23 become apparent from the following detailed description, drawings, and claims.

24 Brief Description of the Drawings

25 Fig. 1 is a block diagram showing modules of the system of the present
26 invention.

27 Fig. 2 is a block diagram showing modules used in the questioning module
28 of the system.

29 Fig. 3 is a flow chart showing a method by which questions are provided

1 by moderators and responded to by participants.

2

3

Detailed Description

4 The system of the present invention is implemented through a server 10
5 that can be accessed by students and teachers (or more generally, participants and
6 moderators) from personal computers 12. At the current time, a Pentium
7 III 500Mhz server running on Windows NT or Linux should be suitable, but other
8 computers could be used, depending on the characteristics that the system is to
9 have.

10 Referring to Fig. 1, the system has a number of interfaces and modules in
11 software form and capable of being stored on a disk or other storage medium.
12 These interfaces and modules may be written as Perl scripts and implemented by
13 the server software and hardware.

14 The application running on the server can include many modules,
15 including a registration module 14, a threaded messaging module 16, a chat
16 module 18, a select audience module 20, and a question module 22; and
17 interfaces, including a participant (student) interface 24 and moderator (teacher)
18 interface 26.

19 Registration module 14, when accessed by a student through student
20 interface 24, provides a user input form with fields that allows the student to
21 register with the courseware system. The student provides basic personal
22 information, such as name and email, creates a password, and can also provide
23 additional information that may be requested on the form. Such additional
24 information can be requested by the teacher and can be used to classify or group
25 students for discussion purposes. The student can identify particular courses for
26 which he or she is registering and types of interactions (such as participant,
27 auditor, or reduced level participant). For example, a student can thus register
28 for two courses as a participant in the courseware and audit another course. The
29 resulting registration data is stored in a database 30. Particularly in a business
30 context, registration can alternatively be performed by an administrator,

1 department head, team leader, or other appropriate person with knowledge of the
2 backgrounds of the participants. Alternatively, if the necessary information is
3 first provided to a database, registration can be automated.

4 Course data can be created and edited by the teacher for students. The
5 student has limited access through the participant interface to allow the student to
6 view the course data and to view his or her own registration data, but this
7 interface does not allow the student to make changes to any such course or
8 registration data.

9 Moderator interface 26 is preferably intuitive and graphical and allows for
10 course creation and editing. The teacher can add lessons and/or sections to
11 course data and edit those lessons and selections on the fly. The course data that
12 is entered can be generated dynamically into HTML pages that the students can
13 view. The teacher can choose among a set of HTML templates that can be
14 customized by the teacher. The teacher can also create a calendar of times for
15 openings, closings, and other dates for the course.

16 An administrator interface (not shown) can be provided to give access for
17 maintenance purposes. In addition, a course administrator can have access to
18 approve registrations prior to entry in the database.

19 Questioning module 22 is shown in more detail in Fig. 2, which shows a
20 number of modules within questioning module 22. An ask question module 32
21 provides a form that allows a teacher to pose a question to all or part of a class or
22 to students among several classes, such as multiple sections for one course, or for
23 different classes with an overlapping interest. Where appropriate, such as when
24 developing a product or service, all participants can be given access to ask
25 question module 22, so that for a particular line of questions, any participant may
26 serve the role of moderator, or at least be able to pose a question. Similarly, the
27 moderator may also serve as a participant.

28 The question can be asked in such a way to request an answer in one of a
29 number of different formats such as multiple choice, short answer, poll, or
30 pro/con answers, and also to request additional comments. The question thus

1 preferably has text, a start date, status indicating whether the teacher can use the
2 question for other courses, specification of the audience for the question based on
3 the select audience function, a number of rounds for interactions (described
4 below), and a time when the question will "close." The opening and closing
5 times thus indicate how long the students have to respond.

6 An answer question module 34 is effectively a response form that allows
7 the student to answer the question. The form is preferably tailored to the type of
8 response that is being requested by the teacher. The student can edit the response
9 through an editing module 36 before the question closes. There can be a late
10 answer option as well to allow a student to answer after the close of the question.

11 An archive module 38 associated with database 30 (Fig. 1) stores questions
12 and answers after the answering period for the questions that have closed. The
13 process may go through multiple rounds of responses, in which case the archive
14 would make each round's answers available upon the closing of that round.

15 Referring to Fig. 3, a method for controlling questions using question
16 module 22 is described. The teacher first writes the question, specifies the
17 question type, audience, number of rounds, and due date for that first round
18 (100). The system presents the question, e.g., by sending students an email
19 indication that the question is open, providing a link to a web response form, and
20 providing a unique identification (ID) for email responses (102). The system
21 acknowledges by responding to the teacher to indicate that the question has
22 opened and identifying the parties or groups to whom the message has been sent
23 (104).

24 The students receive the question by email and see it open on a current
25 assignment page provided by a web server (106). The question also has a link to
26 an appropriate form for answering the question.

27 The students respond to the question on the web or by email, and can
28 further edit their answers until closing time (108). On receiving responses, the
29 system processes answers and adds them to a database (110). The teacher can
30 view these first round answers as they arrive. If responses are not received, the

1 system can send email to everyone or can send email reminders only to those who
2 have not responded by some time prior to closing. When the question closes, the
3 system sends the answers to the archive. This is considered one round.

4 After the first round, the system can pair students who have answered
5 according to a set of rules or criteria established by the teacher, for example,
6 randomly, on alternate sides of a pro/con question (112), based on information
7 provided in the answers, or based on information input during registration. The
8 system can then provide one student's answer to the other paired student or
9 students in the group with a request for a response from that other student,
10 thereby creating a second round of comments. The system can then receive these
11 second round responses and provide them to the students who provided the
12 initial comments, to other members of the group, and/or to the teacher.
13 Alternatively, the second-round responses can be routed to a different group of
14 students. After the period for responding to the second round is closed, all of
15 these answers are provided to the archives. The teacher, having received two sets
16 of comments and responses, can have them all posted or can post a sampling of
17 these answers that are particularly constructive. Some of the first round
18 responses can be flagged by the teacher so as not to be routed to other students, if
19 redundant or not appropriate.

20 The teacher can at any time cause certain answers or all answers to be
21 routed to another individual with a specialty or interest in the area. This allows
22 additional knowledgeable people to be involved in the coursework without
23 requiring their full participation. This process can be performed on a response by
24 response basis, or automatically for certain questions.

25 The system can allocate point units to students, allowing them tag
26 interesting messages or opt out of assignments. These units can be of one or more
27 types. For example, a student may be allowed units that can be used to "pay" to
28 submit a late answer, or to skip a question entirely. Other units can to allow
29 students to identify certain issues, questions, answers or set of responses as being
30 of some significance, such that if enough students identify a particular question,

1 answer or set of responses as being of interest, that group can be automatically
2 promoted to the threaded messaging area for wider discussion or may be raised
3 in class time or through some other chat or messaging session by the moderator.

4 Other features can be provided for the benefit and/or convenience of the
5 teacher. For example, the teacher can have the ability to cut off a particular
6 student from comments if not using the system properly. The system can also
7 have a feature for scanning messages to highlight particular words or phrases, for
8 example, to see if a student focused quickly on a correct concept, to identify the
9 use of any inappropriate language, or to identify particular language indicating
10 that additional follow-up or some more immediate response is appropriate.

11 Referring again to Fig. 1, select audience module 20 allows teachers to
12 access database 30 through moderator interface 26 to view, categorize, and group
13 students into pairs or larger groups. This grouping can be done randomly, based
14 on fields captured during the registration process, or based on responses to
15 certain types of questions as described above, but need not be limited to one
16 particular course or, in the business context, team. Using the moderator interface
17 26, a moderator can allow other moderators to suggest groupings, including their
18 participants, suggest groupings including the participants of other moderators
19 and can approve suggested groupings. The teacher preferably can view all of the
20 registered member information and use that information to create groups as
21 desired. Alternatively, the select audience function can be automated, based on
22 predefined criteria for grouping students based on registration information or
23 other database information. These audiences can then be used to create the series
24 of question, answer, and response interactions described above.

25 Threaded messaging module 16 allows teachers to create forms in which
26 students can post and read comments via either email or entry in a box on a web
27 page. The system is preferably database driven to allow messages to be grouped
28 in database 30 by students and by subject. Threaded messaging module 16 can
29 also be used for promotion of interesting question, answers or participant
30 interactions to a wider audience for more general discussion either manually by a

09610802-070600

1 moderator or automatically as a result of participant collaborative filtering as
2 outlined above.

3 Chat module 18 is a real time communication module that allows live
4 discussion between or among students or among one or more students and a
5 teacher. This module can thus allow a teacher to provide online office hours. In a
6 moderated event, the moderator can receive comments and choose to make them
7 available to the remainder of the group. In addition, the moderator can cut a
8 student off from being able to send messages if appropriate. Chat module 18
9 respects the roles of the participants as defined in the registration module and
10 restricts or enables functionality based on those roles. Chat module 18 can also
11 dynamically generate chat spaces, allowing instant chat rooms for participants
12 who are simultaneously online.

13 Having described preferred embodiments of the present invention, it
14 should be apparent that modifications could be made without departing from the
15 scope of the appended claims.

16 What is claimed is: